

## Nonproliferation and Engagement: Iran and North Korea should not let the opportunity slip by; a comment on the actual state of affairs

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**Nonproliferation and Engagement:  
Iran and North Korea should not let the opportunity slip by**

A comment on the actual state of affairs

**Heinz Gärtner**

*Deutsche Zusammenfassung:*

*Es gibt Zweifel, ob Irans Nuklearprogramm friedlich ist. Nordkorea führte bereits Nuklearbombentests durch. US Präsident Obama hat bi- und multilaterale Verhandlungen angeboten. Seine „engagement“ Politik bedeutet nicht „appeasement“ sondern eine Chance für beide Staaten, gemeinsam eine Lösung für die Nuklearprogramme zu finden. Obamas Vision einer nuklearfreien Welt schließt nicht nur die Verhinderung der Proliferation von Nuklearwaffen sondern auch Abrüstung der existierenden Nuklearstaaten als Vorbildwirkung ein. Der Iran und Nordkorea wären gut beraten, diese Gelegenheit zu ergreifen. Im Rahmen der Vereinten Nationen wurde dem Iran in Genf im September 2009 ein Angebot gemacht, niedrig angereichertes Uran im Ausland weiter anreichern zu lassen. Die technischen Details dieses Vorschlages müssen verhandelt werden. Wichtiger jedoch ist, dass der Iran das Angebot prinzipiell als vertrauensbildende Maßnahme ergreift und sich nicht mit Kränkungen der Vergangenheit (z.B. „Achse des Bösen“) aufhält. Sollte der Iran dieses Angebot zurückweisen, würde Obamas „engagement“ Politik innenpolitisch als schwerwiegende Niederlage dargestellt werden. „Engagement“ von Nordkorea bedeutet die Schaffung einer Atmosphäre, die eine militärische Konfrontation unwahrscheinlicher macht. Der KSZE Prozess während des Ost-West Konfliktes kann als Vorbild dienen. Geduld ist eine wesentliche Voraussetzung für „engagement.“*

# **Nonproliferation and Engagement: Iran and North Korea should not let the opportunity slip by**

## **Change**

After ten years of stagnation, the new U.S. administration has adopted a new approach to arms control and non-proliferation. The Bush administration concentrated solely on counter-proliferation: a policy that included the use of force and ranged from interception of suspicious ships to regime change. President Obama, in stark contrast, stresses both non-proliferation and disarmament in the broader context of diplomacy and negotiation. The change is profound. President Bush' approach was selective; President Obama's approach is comprehensive. It can put the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on a broader basis. After the review conferences in 2000 and 2005, the Non-aligned States, including Iran, complained that the nuclear-weapon states were creating a system of *haves* and *have-nots*. The nuclear weapon states were ignoring their commitment, enshrined in Article VI of the NPT,<sup>1</sup> to "pursue negotiations in good faith" that would ultimately lead at "an early date" to "a treaty on general and complete disarmament." This is now changing. Disarmament of the nuclear powers has come to the fore.

## **Engagement**

In several speeches, Barack Obama has laid out a different approach to arms control. As early as his speech in Berlin during the election campaign in July 2008, he stressed that "partnership and cooperation among nations" was the only way to protect their "common security."<sup>2</sup> On several occasions he embraced "a new era of engagement based on mutual interest and mutual respect."<sup>3</sup> In his inaugural speech, Obama offered to "extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist."<sup>4</sup>

There is some misunderstanding about the concept of engagement on the part of both the right wing opposition in the U.S. and regimes such as Iran and North Korea. In contrast to Obama's predecessor who refrained from talking with adversaries, the concept involves talking to hostile regimes - but not yielding to them. Direct talk is not necessarily nice talk.

- Engagement is involvement, not appeasement
- It is a start, not a goal
- It is a means, not an end in itself
- It is a process, not a destination
- It is a sign of strength, not weakness

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<sup>1</sup> Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Non-Proliferation Treaty, NPT), signed on 1 July 1968 and entered into force on March 5, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> Senator Barack Obama in Berlin, Germany, *The New York Times*, April 24, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> For example, inter alia, Obama's speech to the United Nations General Assembly, *The New York Times*, September 24, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Obama's speech on his inauguration as 44th president, *The Associated Press*, Jan. 20, 2009.

Engagement diplomacy offers all participants a chance to come closer to a solution. It is not about victory; it is about problem-solving. It requires reciprocity. If there is no visible progress, the fierce opposition to this strategy among the hawks on all sides will gain momentum.

## **Prague**

The NPT is based on three mutually reinforcing pillars of non-proliferation, disarmament and peaceful uses of nuclear energy. While George W. Bush ignored disarmament, President Obama made it the centrepiece of his speech in Prague in April 2009. He stressed all three pillars. Countries with nuclear weapons should move towards disarmament, countries without nuclear weapons should not acquire them, and all countries could enjoy access to peaceful nuclear energy.<sup>5</sup> This, however, was not merely a general declaration. Obama sought support for a series of concrete steps towards a “world free of nuclear weapons.”

They include:

- A new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with Russia
- The ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) by the United States,
- The Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT)
- An international fuel bank
- A new international effort to secure all vulnerable nuclear material around the world within four years.

## **Ankara and Cairo**

In both Ankara<sup>6</sup> and Cairo<sup>7</sup>, Obama made it clear that America was not – and would never be – at war with Islam. This is a reversal of Samuel Huntington’s thesis in the *Clash of Civilizations*<sup>8</sup> which influenced President Bush’s attitude towards Islam decisively. For Huntington, the cultures and religions of the West and Islam are incompatible; they are prone to conflict. Radicals on both sides, the West and Islam, endorsed this assessment. The consequence has been an ever increasing hostile atmosphere.

In Cairo, Obama stressed once more that no nation had an exclusive hold over nuclear weapons. He went on to say that he was committed to the second pillar of the NPT: the peaceful use of nuclear energy. Therefore any nation - including Iran - should have the right of access to peaceful nuclear power, as long as it complied with its obligations under the NPT. He sees this commitment as the core of the treaty; it should be kept for all who fully abide by it. And this would apply to all countries in the region.

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<sup>5</sup> Obama’s speech in Prague, *The New York Times*, April 5, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Obama’s speech in Cairo, *The New York Times*, June 4, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> US President’s speech before the Turkish Parliament, *The New York Times*, April 7, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (Simon & Schuster: New York), 1998.

## Comprehensive approach

In various speeches, Obama has made it clear that unlike George Bush, he does not interpret the NPT selectively. No longer are there grounds for the criticism that nuclear powers do not care about disarmament. Equally groundless is the claim that they only want to prevent non-nuclear weapon states from acquiring nuclear technology as they are intent upon creating two classes of states: the *haves* and the *have-nots*. However true this might have been in the past, Obama now wants to change direction.

At the UN General Assembly Obama<sup>9</sup> reconfirmed all these commitments. This led to the Security Council's adoption of resolution 1887.<sup>10</sup> The media widely reported that the resolution referred solely to non-proliferation, Iran and North Korea. This is not true. It placed equal emphasis on disarmament. The Heads of State and Government re-affirmed that they would meet their obligations towards arms control, disarmament and the prevention of all forms of proliferation relating to weapons of mass destruction of every kind.

Especially with reference to Iran and North Korea, some observers argue that the NPT is dead. Of course, there are some indications that this argument holds true. Several countries such as India, Pakistan, North Korea and (allegedly) Israel have developed nuclear weapons outside the treaty framework. However, others have returned to the NPT fold, such as South Africa and Libya. Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Belarus have since redeployed their nuclear weapons to Russia. Fortunately, President Kennedy's dire prediction that by the eighties the world would see around 30 nuclear weapon states has not come true. In terms of numbers, there is no clear picture about potential nuclear weapon states.

The context today is markedly different; Obama's initiatives, however, have set the NPT in a comprehensive and much broader context. He is committed to preserving and strengthening the authority and integrity of the NPT by emphasizing simultaneously all three mutually reinforcing pillars: non-proliferation, disarmament and the peaceful use of nuclear energy. Furthermore, he called for a "world free of nuclear weapons." This changes the whole attitude towards nuclear weapons. Over the course of the Cold War, nuclear weapons achieved renown with their reputation of prestige and power, as well as an insurance policy. In the 'new triad' of the Nuclear Posture Review promulgated by the Bush administration in 2001,<sup>11</sup> nuclear and non-nuclear weapons alike were considered offensive strike systems. The purpose of nuclear weapons was not to deter, but to fight wars with. It was thus hard to argue that non-nuclear weapon states should renounce the use of such weapons. If they are good for the big boys, why not for the little boys as well? For Obama, nuclear weapons will retain their rationale as a deterrent, but only until they are ultimately abolished. In this new atmosphere, nuclear weapons might well be discredited. States striving to acquire nuclear arsenals will feel that they are on the wrong side of history.

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<sup>9</sup> Obama's Speech to the *United Nations General Assembly*, September 2009, United Nations Headquarters, New York, September 23, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Resolution 1887 (2009), Adopted by the Security Council at its 6191st meeting, on 24 September 2009.

<sup>11</sup> *Nuclear Posture Review*, Submitted to Congress on 31 December 2001, 8 January 2002.

## Iran

Iran and North Korea have an historic chance to seize this opportunity and build confidence. Iran should accept as a starting point for diplomatic engagement the nuclear programme offer that the United Nations made in September 2009 in Geneva. The technical details, such as the location of enrichment, are not decisive. Whether two or three quarters of the low enriched uranium are exported all at once or in small batches, whether Iran gets it back later or at the same time, or whether Iran buys part of the fuel abroad is of lesser significance. It is of paramount importance that an agreement in principle is reached and all sides abide by that agreement. The UN offer is not a solution per se since Iran still will not stop enriching uranium, but it may well be a confidence-building measure. If the proposal is implemented, it could become a mini-pilot project for a fuel bank under international supervision. On the one hand, if Iran's nuclear programme is really peaceful as Iran claims, Iran's next steps should be the ratification and implementation of the CTBT, the additional protocol to the NPT and comprehensive safeguards that allow for more intrusive inspections. On the other hand, the United States could include "negative security assurances" in its new Nuclear Posture Review. They would guarantee that the U.S. would not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states. Both Iran and North Korea should see this as signal to stop looking at the U.S. as a nuclear threat. Iran's fears that the U.S. could renege on its word and abandon its peaceful nuclear programme appear groundless in the context of Obama's comprehensive approach towards the NPT.

If Iran misses this opportunity, the window could be slammed shut for a long time to come. More severe sanctions could follow and gain in legitimacy. Russia and China might go along with the sanctions. A military solution might even loom large. President Obama faces fierce domestic opposition to his engagement policy. Critics are already calling it 'appeasement' and 'capitulation'. So far, the criticism hails from the far right. If engagement fails in the case of Iran, more criticism might well up from the centre. It is up to Iran to keep the window open. Iran should stop complaining about past grievances, some of which might be justified in the light of certain actions by the Bush administration (viz. the axis of evil). Instead, it should think about its future relations with the U.S. and the West.

## North Korea

North Korea left the NPT 2003. It accused the Bush administration of having violated the agreed framework concluded in 1994 with the Clinton administration under which North Korea had agreed to halt and eventually dismantle its production of nuclear weapons-grade material under IAEA verification. In return, the U.S. had promised to supply large shipments of fuel oil and build two light-water nuclear power reactors. Subsequently, North Korea tested two nuclear devices and several long-range missiles. Since then, neither the six-party negotiations nor coercive sanctions seem to have worked and persuaded North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions.<sup>12</sup> A policy of engagement, however, does not offer a solution to the nuclear issue as yet; it is a process. Hence, it is important to

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<sup>12</sup> Andrei Lankov, Changing North Korea: An Information Campaign Can Beat the Regime, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2009.

keep North Korea engaged. It can reduce the likelihood of confrontation and support an environment conducive to exchange and interaction. Engagement goes beyond simply talking. It includes a lively exchange of cultural, humanitarian, economic and academic programmes. During the Cold War, the approach adopted by the Conference on Security and Cooperation (CSCE) managed to bring about behavioural and societal change under Communism. It might work again. The CSCE process was based on three 'baskets':

- Questions relating to security,
- Cooperation in the fields of economics, science and technology and the environment,
- Cooperation in humanitarian and other fields.

Humanitarian issues (starting with family reunification), dissemination of information, internships and scholarships, cultural events (starting with concerts) and economic openings (as evidenced by the Kaesong Industrial Complex where some 40,000 North Koreans work for South Korean companies) could prove a good start. Attractive alternatives might force the regime to reconsider its policies. This includes economic measures, cultural and humanitarian issues, as well as the field of security with respect to the country's nuclear programme.

## **Conclusions**

Iran and North Korea are not easy test cases for President Barack Obama's concept of engagement. If they fail, Obama's efforts may well be decisively weakened - especially at home. At the same time, they offer Iran and North Korea a golden opportunity to change their policies and attitudes without losing face. However, there is no quick fix. Patience is an essential prerequisite for engagement.

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